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EU must strike balance between its values and interests

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INSIGHT

Self-serving agenda

Zhou Xiaoming says Biden’s ‘America first’ vaccine policy is a harbinger of things to come

During a G7 meeting on February 19, US President Joe Biden announced a US\$2 billion donation to the Covax Facility, the global effort to provide vaccines for poor countries, with an additional US\$2 billion in funding contingent on contributions from other nations.

The move was late in coming – and perceived by many as an attempt to repair the United States’ reputation and mend fences with the rest of the world following the Donald Trump presidency. It was, nevertheless, a welcome move, giving a much-needed financial boost to the Covax Facility.

Unfortunately, the Biden administration’s other decisions on health cooperation are not endearing the US to the developing world.

For months, the US, together with the European Union and Britain, has opposed a proposal by India and South Africa at the World Trade Organization that intellectual property rules related to Covid-19 vaccines should be temporarily suspended. The waiver would allow drug makers in poor countries to produce generic versions of these vaccines to ensure their citizens’ timely access to vaccines.

And yet, despite the fact that most coronavirus vaccines were developed with government funding or crowdfunded, wealthy nations like the US argue that the waiver would stifle innovation at pharmaceutical companies. This, in effect, robs poor countries of a chance to quickly roll out mass vaccinations, which would result in many avoidable deaths.

For this reason, World Health Organization Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus last week blasted those countries for resisting the waiver.

Calling on WTO members to waive intellectual property rules and save lives in a once-in-a-century public health crisis, he said: “If not now, when?”

Increasingly, there is a sense in the developing world that the White House values the profits of American drug makers more than lives in other countries.

Then there is the vaccine hoarding in the developed world. According to an article in *The Lancet*, rich nations, with just 16 per cent of the world’s population, have pre-ordered 70 per cent of the doses of five major vaccine candidates available in 2021.

Washington has turned a worldwide public health issue into a matter of national rivalry

These deals undermine the efforts of the Covax Facility to secure doses for poorer nations. Consequently, Ivory Coast and Ghana are the only countries so far to have received vaccines from the Covax Facility.

Meanwhile, the US government has secured 600 million doses of vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna to be made by the end of July, and bought many doses of other vaccines. All told, enough advance orders have been placed to immunise every American twice over, while about 100 countries do not have a single dose.

This brings to mind a scene painted by Tang poet Du Fu in an oft-quoted line: “Behind those vermilion gates, meat and

wine go to waste; while out on the road lie the bones of men frozen to death.”

The vaccine divide between developed and developing countries has prompted UN chief Antonio Guterres to call on wealthy nations to “share excess doses”. Last month, French President Emmanuel Macron suggested that the EU and the US allocate up to 5 per cent of their doses to developing nations, an idea that he said German Chancellor Angela Merkel supported. However, these calls have fallen on deaf ears in Washington. The US flatly refuses to donate its doses before it has an abundant domestic supply.

China, although it is also under pressure to accelerate its vaccination programme at home, has gone to the rescue of other developing countries. It says it is donating vaccines to 53 countries and exporting to 27. It is also providing 10 million doses for developing nations through the Covax Facility.

In countries such as Turkey and the Philippines, Chinese vaccines have been – and may continue to be for months to come – the only life-saving jabs available.

And yet the US is “concerned” by this development. White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki last month characterised China’s efforts to help make affordable vaccines available to the world as “a means of making progress diplomatically”.

Such a view merely reflects the Biden administration’s narrow calculation of geopolitics. Washington has turned a worldwide public health issue into a matter of national rivalry and soft power. Apparently, containment of a country it sees as an adversary is more important than global containment of coronavirus.

But consider this: is it conscionable for someone who is loath to lend a helping

hand himself to then try to stop other people from putting out a fire in his neighbour’s house – just because he hates to see the neighbour being grateful to them?

Again, one has to wonder if the Biden administration is more interested in pursuing its own geopolitical goals than saving lives, not to mention livelihoods, in the rest of the world.

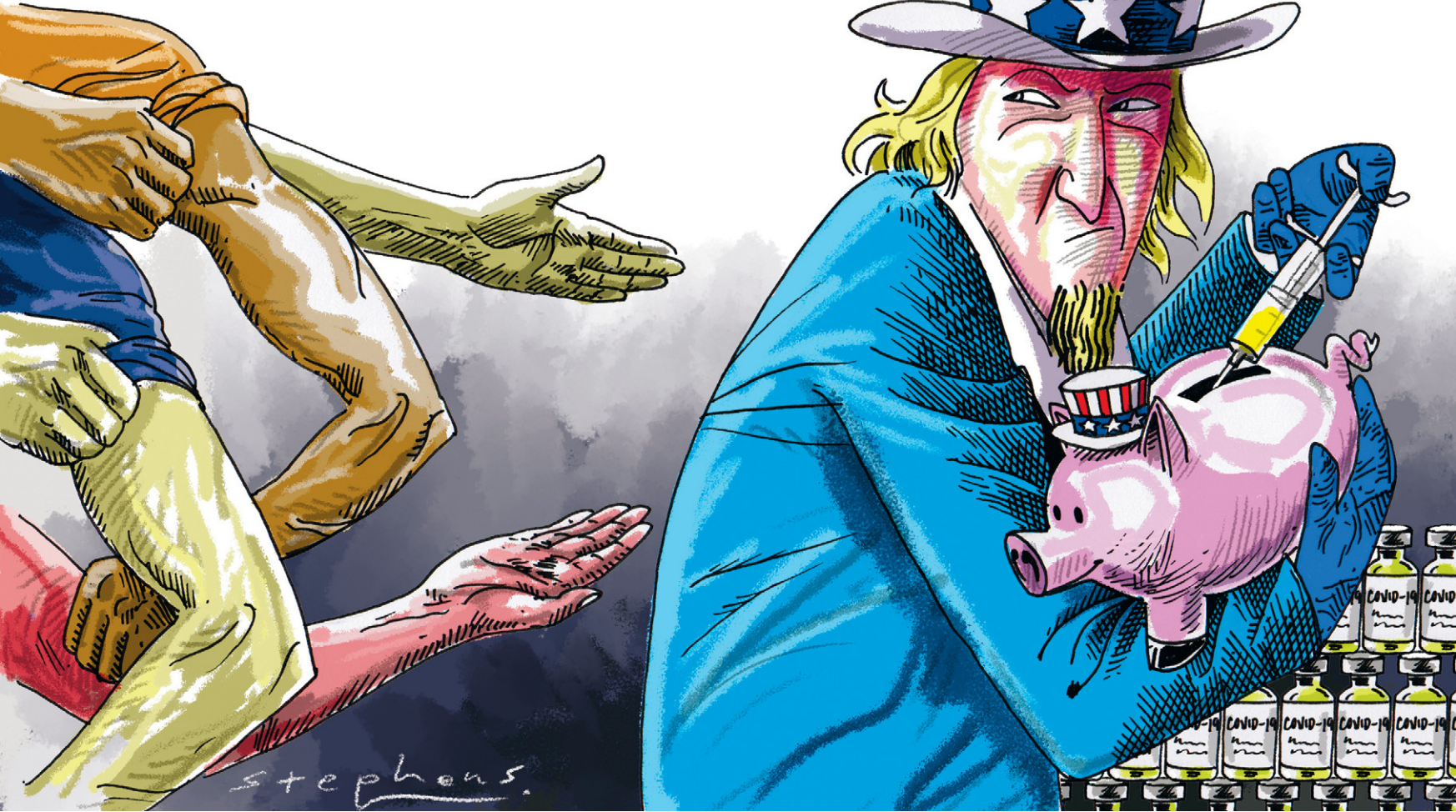
Furthermore, the current administration appears to be taking the same divisive approach to international public health cooperation as the previous administration.

Last month, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan accused China of withholding information about the initial outbreak of Covid-19 from WHO investigators, a charge that members of the mission quickly refuted.

It is a plain fact that the world can’t beat the coronavirus without solidarity. Indeed, at a time when humanity is under assault, all countries should be united as one to fight the common enemy. To fail to work together is to enable the deadly virus to continue to claim lives and disrupt the world economy.

Yes, America is back, all right – and repeating the same old stuff. The self-serving agenda, the disregard for other countries: it’s as if Donald Trump never left. If the Biden administration’s policy on vaccination is the harbinger of things to come, it should be safe to conclude that US foreign policy will continue to be guided by geopolitical concerns instead of genuine issues such as the well-being of other peoples and the proper functioning of international organisations.

Zhou Xiaoming is currently a senior researcher at the Centre for China and Globalisation and former deputy permanent representative of China’s Permanent Mission to the United Nations Office in Geneva



EU must strike balance between its values and interests

Li Xing says as US-China rivalry sharpens, Europe’s best strategy is to bet on both sides

“Standing in two boats” is a Chinese idiomatic expression which means having difficulty deciding between two choices. To avoid choosing one and losing the other, one has to hedge, and commitment to either choice is half-hearted. This phrase comes to mind when analysing the EU’s two most important external relations: with China and the United States.

EU-China relations have grown closer in some areas. Last year, China replaced the US to become the EU’s largest trading partner, and the two concluded a long-awaited investment treaty at the end of the year. China is also the EU’s strategic partner on issues such as climate change and clean energy transition. Both sides committed to implementing the Paris climate agreement and lead on climate action.

Multilateralism is core to both China’s and the EU’s approach to foreign policy. The same could not be said for the US under former president Donald Trump, who favoured unilateralism and isolationism.

However, EU-China relations are facing challenges in several areas: first, on values such as human rights, religious rights and democracy; second, on economic issues such as market access, intellectual property rights and security questions on China’s hi-tech products; third, on macro political issues, such as state capitalism system and its Belt and Road Initiative; and fourth, on Beijing’s

increasing role in Europe’s former colonies in Africa and Latin America.

Given these challenges, it is no surprise the EU identifies China as a competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and as a “systemic rival” promoting an alternative model of governance.

Meanwhile, the Europe-US relationship has been substantially weakened by a series of crises and a parallel change in US foreign policy as a consequence of its internal politics.

In concrete terms, the transatlantic relationship is deteriorating as a result of the two sides’ widening gaps on policies and positions related to a range of global issues, international institutions and norms, multilateralism and even Nato.

Currently, the EU is facing a dual challenge from both “US exceptionalism” and “Chinese assertiveness”. In addition, EU-China relations are affected by the intense power struggle between China and the US, which will shape the trajectory of the global order for years to come. To maximise its interests, the EU’s best strategy is to bet on both sides.

EU think tanks agree that most member states want to uphold the values and norms they historically share with the US while wishing to economically benefit from engagement with China. They all consider the US to be their most important ally for military protection.

Ideally, the EU wants to keep a norm- and value-based coalition with the US to deal with Beijing’s influence and

challenge, while it contends with the US’ “America first” in vital economic and geopolitical spheres of interest.

The EU’s strong awareness of keeping a balance between China and the US is clearly reflected by a recent public opinion survey in 11 EU countries, which shows that a majority preferred their country not to take sides in any conflict between Beijing and Washington.

Multilateralism is core to both China’s and the EU’s approach to foreign policy

The EU faces a dichotomy. On the one hand, it identifies itself as a defender of liberal idealism, as characterised by its identity as a “normative power”. On the other, it is also driven by realist materialism, epitomised by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s ambition to lead a “geopolitical commission” which protects the EU’s hardcore interests, such as trade, technology, defence and the environment.

Such a dichotomy means the EU is constantly “standing in two boats”. One boat justifies the realistic calculation that

the EU needs to engage in external geopolitical and socioeconomic competition with both the US and China. To do so, it must be assertive in dealing with its political, economic, technological and security issues. Another boat rationalises the EU’s wish to maintain its ideational image as a “norm defender” in world politics.

To conclude, “standing in two boats” will eventually lead the EU to “pragmatic idealism” – a good balance between interests and values. Global transformation, the shift in the balance of power brought about by China’s rise, China-US rivalry and the EU’s internal changes, are all shaping and reshaping EU-China and EU-US relations. These relationships walk a fine line between partnership and competition, and between interest and value.

The election of a new president will not fundamentally change US global interests and the shift in the balance of power. The US decision to impose sanctions on a company building the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Germany on January 20, just as President Joe Biden was being sworn in, confirms Churchill’s teaching: “We have no lasting friends, no lasting enemies, only lasting interests.”

Likewise, the US cannot take it for granted that the EU will be a natural supporter to its “international democratic coalition” to contain China’s rise.

Professor Li Xing is director of the Research Centre on Development and International Relations, Department of Politics and Society, at Aalborg University, Denmark

Keeping hope of democracy alive is a fools dream

Michael Chugani says the requirement that only patriots can govern, without a clear definition, can be used by loyalists as a pretext for Cultural Revolution-style scapegoating

Keep hope alive. That was former US president Barack Obama’s campaign slogan. Keeping hope alive is not a hurdle in democracies. Those who loathe Donald Trump proved it by voting him out. Those who idolise him proved it by jam-packing a rally where Trump hinted at a comeback.

It requires courage to keep hope alive in authoritarian regimes. Yet the people of Myanmar are doing that, some by losing their lives, after a military coup toppled the government.

I kept hope alive by believing Beijing would allow Hong Kong to move gradually towards true democracy. I reluctantly backed the government’s 2015 reform package, based on Beijing’s 2014 framework, as a first step. The opposition, which voted it down, labelled me a blue ribbon.

Now the blue ribbons, who comprise Beijing’s loyalist camp, say I have defected to the pro-democracy’s yellow camp, which opposes Beijing’s tightening grip on Hong Kong.

I support both democracy and Beijing’s sovereignty over Hong Kong. They are not mutually exclusive. Beijing, obsessed with the false belief that an independence movement has taken root, doesn’t seem to grasp that.

A headline in the *Post* said Beijing should let Hong Kong be Hong Kong. It encapsulated the soul of Hong Kong people. Letting us be who we are doesn’t mean subversion, secession, colluding with foreign forces, or being unpatriotic. It means preserving our free way of life that allows independent thought, a lively media, and right to protest.

Western democracies now see us as an oppressed city under Beijing’s thumb, which has curtailed our freedoms with a sweeping but vague national security law. Beijing is expected to further alter Hong Kong’s DNA when the country’s parliament meets this weekend. It has been reported that top leaders will overhaul Hong Kong’s election structure to allow only patriots to govern.

One possible change is to neuter the district councils, which the opposition controls after a 2019 landslide, so its members can no longer be part of the Election Committee that selects the chief executive.

Another reported change is to allow only patriots to be district council and Legislative Council members. How will Beijing define who a patriot is? Legislators must already swear to uphold the Basic Law. The same will apply to district councillors. But that, apparently, isn’t enough to pass the patriot test.

Don’t these loyalists know that ... they are betraying the Hong Kong values they grew up with?

Constitutional and Mainland Affairs secretary Erick Tsang Kwok-wai said people who were not truly patriotic had entered the system after elections. Beijing’s top official overseeing Hong Kong, Xia Baolong, said the election system must be overhauled to ensure only patriots can rule.

This is baffling. Some 1.6 million Hongkongers voted for the opposition in 2019, allowing it to sweep the district council elections. The opposition almost always dominates in direct Legco elections.

If opposition candidates who won in free elections are not patriots, are the millions who voted for them also not patriots?

Loyalists such as former Legco president Rita Fan Hsu Lai-tai and Legco member Priscilla Leung Mei-fun have suggested election candidates should be vetted before being allowed to run. What next? Patriot tests for teachers, parents, even street cleaners? Don’t these loyalists know that, in rushing to prove their patriotism, they are betraying the Hong Kong values they grew up with?

Last week, Beijing’s mouthpiece media attacked the newly promoted Permanent Secretary for Food and Health Vivian Lau Lee-kwan as unpatriotic for allegedly tolerating anti-government slogans on so-called Lennon Walls. Pro-Beijing legislator Regina Ip Lau Suk-ye defended her by pointing out a pending court case tied Lau’s hands. Ip urged against launching Cultural Revolution-style attacks.

I applaud Ip but fear Cultural Revolution-style scapegoating will come now that Beijing has declared only patriots can govern, without a clear definition. Keeping the democracy hope alive is fast becoming a fool’s dream.

Michael Chugani is a Hong Kong journalist and TV show host



The election system is to be overhauled to ensure only patriots can govern Hong Kong. Photo: Bloomberg